IT'S OUR BUSINESS

Alcohol, drugs and gambling in the workplace

Workplace Peer Support

Work puts people in close contact for the longest portion of their waking day. Because of the time they spend together, co-workers get to know each other well. They are often the first to spot the changes in each other that might indicate a personal difficulty.

Co-workers can be very effective in encouraging someone experiencing a personal problem to get help. They can also help each other stay safe

and well. This is called workplace peer support. Sometimes it is done in a formal, organized way, and sometimes it happens informally.

Read on to learn more about

- what workplace peer support is all about
- the benefits of peer support
- the kinds of peer support possible
- how an employer can promote peer suppor
- tips for starting a workplace peer support team

WHAT IS PEER SUPPORT?

Workplace peer support is all about peers helping peers, or one worker helping another. An employee's personal problems can affect their job performance. Alcohol/drug abuse, tobacco use, problem gambling, depression or other mental health problems, and strained marriage or family relationships are some of the problems that, if left unchecked, may lead to health and safety risks at work.

Peer support gives co-workers an opportunity to offer support and encouragement to people they work with who are having personal troubles.

The basic principle of peer support is that co-workers provide a bridge between an employee with a problem and the people who can help them. This kind of support can happen whether your organization has a formal workplace peer support program or not.

Peer support can mean talking to colleagues when you notice changes in their behavior that concern you. When peer support is accepted and valued in a workplace, it is easier to tell co-workers that you are concerned about them. You can also offer to assist them in getting help. Remember, it is not useful to press them for details about "the problem." Instead, encourage them to seek help in finding the solution.

For peer support to work, it's important for you to know about your employer's approach to assisting employees with personal problems. Know whom to approach if you or your co-workers need help sorting out personal issues. Know where professional help is available, both within your organization and within your community.

Listening without judgment is a learned skill. So is the ability to encourage a co-worker with a problem to get help. A workplace can offer education to all employees to promote informal peer support and it can offer specialized training to employees who are members of a more structured peer support team.

Peer support is for all employees.

Peer support is not only for those who are having problems. Co-workers can help each other to stay safe and healthy through small, daily efforts like offering an encouraging word or listening when someone has had a rough day. When peer support happens in a more formal way, the team might choose to offer wellness activities and social events in the workplace to benefit all employees.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PEER SUPPORT?

When peers support each other in getting the help needed to deal with personal problems, everybody wins. If an employee notices changes in a co-worker and encourages that person to get help, the problem doesn't have to get so bad that it affects work performance and becomes noticeable to the supervisor. The person with the problem can get professional help to deal with it early.

The other members of the work team also benefit. They are no longer under pressure to remain silent when they see their co-workers experiencing problems that can affect everyone's health and safety. They learn that covering up doesn't help anyone—it just lets the problem continue and usually it gets worse. With peer support, colleagues become part of the solution instead of being part of the problem.

Everybody benefits because the responsibility for creating a safe and supportive workplace is shared by all employees, not just management.

Everyone benefits when the responsibility for creating a safe and supportive workplace is shared by all.

A PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM TO SUIT EVERY WORKPLACE

- Peer support can be a benefit to any workplace, large or small. Each organization must design its peer support program to meet its own specific needs.
- Some teams will limit their function to assisting co-workers in finding help if they are affected by personal problems. Other peer support teams will serve as ambassadors for the company's Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP). Their goal will be to publicize the EFAP and make sure that all employees know about it. They may also help a specific employee to make contact with the EFAP provider.
- In addition to supporting the EFAP, most teams also establish strong relationships with other workplace programs such as occupational health and safety groups. Peer support team members need to understand the roles of others in keeping the workplace safe and well. They also need to understand the policies and regulations that govern their workplace—for example, safety regulations and policies on alcohol, drug and tobacco use. Knowing workplace policy can help team members make the most appropriate referrals.
- Some teams will encourage a colleague to draw on the professional help available in the community. An employee may also be encouraged to attend a support group. This might be an independent group like Alcoholics Anonymous, which is a 12-step support group (other examples of 12-step support groups are Gamblers Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Al-Anon) or a stop smoking group. There are also other types of support groups that deal with common problems like depression or grief and loss.
- Successful peer support programs will offer activities based on the needs of their colleagues and organizations. This might mean hosting workplace wellness events. It might include organizing support group meetings in the workplace. It may even include team members "buddying" with new employees to participate in their orientation and welcome to the workplace.

STEPS THE EMPLOYER CAN TAKE TO PROMOTE PEER SUPPORT

If you would like to get a peer support program started in your workplace, begin with education. Organize information sessions to talk about the benefits of peer support. Invite speakers in to help all employees understand how peer support programming works. Host a meeting for interested employees to talk about starting a team.

You must also be prepared to offer some support in order for your workplace team to succeed. Members may need help from the organization in deciding the key functions of the team. They may need space in which to meet. In order for the team to succeed, the organization must also provide ongoing training for all team members.

Individual members may require time away from their work duties to attend meetings or provide services to their co-workers. They may also need time off to attend training.

TIPS ON WHERE TO START FOR WORKPLACE PEER SUPPORT TEAM MEMBERS

Although it's important to tailor your team to the needs of your colleagues and your workplace, there are some steps that almost all teams must take to get started. Here is a list of common peer support team tasks.

Decide on the function or role of your team

Deciding on the purpose and goals of your individual team is an important first step. Will you assist your co-workers in obtaining help when they are experiencing problems? Will your goal be to publicize your EFAP and help employees to use it? Will you emphasize a preventive approach by organizing workplace wellness events?

Decide on the membership of your team

There are lots of options. One approach is for team members to be appointed by management. Another is for people who are interested to volunteer to become team members. In some organizations, team members are nominated by their peers because they possess certain skills or are seen as credible and respected. In others, teams are formed at the "grassroots," by a group of employees who share recovery from a common problem. For example, people who have successfully dealt with alcohol, drug or gambling addictions may choose to give something back to their supportive workplaces by offering to talk with others who are experiencing similar problems.

The role of organized labour in promoting peer support is also very valuable. Some workplaces strive for a balance of union and non-union members on their teams.

Talk about how your team will maintain itself

Once a core team of interested members has been identified, the team needs to determine how it will sustain itself over time. Again, there are options. Some teams hold recruitment drives and then train and maintain the same group for a certain length of time. Other teams are made up of an evolving group of changing members that coach and train each other on an ongoing basis. Some teams will choose to welcome new members a couple of times a year, ensuring that the necessary training occurs immediately after recruitment.

Decide how often and where you will meet

Your team also needs to talk about what you will do at meetings. Will you gather for training and information purposes only? Will you meet to plan events for the workplace? Perhaps you will meet to talk about the needs of team members. If your team is going to stay strong and maintain itself over time, it is also important for you to meet to celebrate your successes.

Identify your training needs

Peer support team members must recognize the importance of such things as confidentiality, objectivity, and listening without judgment. They must be trained to offer support and encouragement without trying to counsel. Team members are not expected to diagnose or fix problems themselves. Instead, they must be knowledgeable about the resources that are available to help employees. It is also valuable for them to receive training about such issues as addiction, grief and loss, depression, stress, suicide, financial problems, and so on.

Develop guidelines to handle confidentiality

Employees must be able to trust that they can get help from a member of their peer support team without anyone else finding out. This is the cornerstone of successful peer support programs. It is important to establish clear confidentiality guidelines within the peer support program. Team members must also understand other confidentiality policies in the workplace, such as those governing managers, occupational health staff, and EFAP providers. New teams may also seek expert advice about confidentiality from someone who specializes in this field. A lawyer familiar with confidentiality guidelines can play an important part in the team's training.

Confidentiality is the cornerstone of a successful peer support program.

Maintain updated information about resources available

Some teams keep a book of community and company resources that offer help for personal problems. One team member can be responsible for ensuring it is updated regularly. Many teams invite guest speakers from these groups, and have them talk about their services.

Talk about how you will promote your services

You could, for example, publish a peer support brochure, develop promotional posters, or have team members speak to employees at safety meetings or other events. Some organizations make peer support team introductions part of the orientation process when they hire new staff.

Decide how people will contact the team

Some teams choose to wait until their fellow employees approach them. However, it is sometimes very difficult for people who are experiencing personal problems to ask for help. Some teams encourage members to approach employees whom they are concerned about. Successfully encouraging people to seek or accept help requires skill and team members who undertake this should have special training. If team members come on too strong, offer advice or start telling their co-workers what to do, they may alienate workers and defeat the whole purpose of a peer support program. Remember that the goal is peer support, not peer pressure.

Your team will also have to decide if members will be available after work hours or whether peer support services will only be available during certain hours. Will your services be available to employees only, or will you also talk to family members? These are important decisions. Remember that you can start small and add new services as your team evolves.

The goal is peer support not peer pressure.

Talk about how you will know your program is working

Most teams want to know that their efforts are making a difference. This is an important part of keeping team members interested and encouraged to keep participating. It's also important to know whether or not the peer support team is doing a good job. Plan how you will evaluate the success of your program.

You may want to set aside time at each meeting to talk about the number of contacts each member has made since the last meeting. Maybe you will count the number of referrals each member has made to sources of help. You might choose to look at activities you have offered and identify which were most effective.

You may want to get feedback from outside the team, as well. A written survey is one way to do this. You can ask all employees if they are aware of the peer support program. If they have used it, you can ask if they were satisfied or if they have any suggestions for improvement. For those who have not used the program, you can ask if they would use it if they had a problem. Evaluation can help you enhance the things that are working well for you and let go of the things that are not working as well.

Remember that evaluation does not mean breaking confidentiality. It is not necessary to talk about specific cases or specific employees. It is helpful to talk about the process of those contacts: Did you make referrals? Did your co-workers follow through? Have you remembered to contact them recently to make sure they are getting the help they need?

Ask what the organization will need from the team

The organization is far more likely to support team activities if they can actually see that peer support is working. Evaluating your program and presenting the results to the organization may be one way to demonstrate this. Some organizations may require you to account for your hours and activities. Each team is unique and each organization may request different things from their team.

PEER SUPPORT WORKS

Companies and organizations with successful peer support programs describe increased use of their EFAP and decreased tolerance of unhealthy behaviour by co-workers. EFAP providers who track referral sources also report that peers are very successful in encouraging those who are experiencing personal problems to get help. Men and women recovering from personal difficulties often credit their co-workers with caring enough to intervene and helping them to take the first step.

RESOURCES

- Many good books about peer support programming are available. Check your local library for resources.
- Talk to people you know who work for companies with peer support programs. Find out what works or invite them to your workplace to talk about the benefits of their program.
- Talk to your union. Many unions strongly support peer support programming and can offer information about how to get started.

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For more information

AADAC (Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission) offers a range of services to assist businesses in managing workplace substance use and gambling concerns. These services include

Information/Resources • Besides the *It's Our Business Information Series*, AADAC offers several resources for workplace leaders and employees.

The *It's Our Business* manual gives leaders in the workplace the information they need to build a healthy, well-functioning workplace team. This practical, well-organized binder offers clear information and insightful advice in an easy-to-follow format, based on a philosophy of fitness for work. Employers and managers are advised to remain focused on what is their business: the employee's ability to do his or her job.

To supplement the manual, AADAC offers three brochures to inform employees and enlist them as allies in creating a workplace that is free from the problems created by the abuse of alcohol, other drugs and gambling:

- *Is Drinking, Using Drugs or Gambling Affecting My Work?* helps employees to assess whether their work is being affected by their substance use or gambling and offers suggestions on finding further help.
- *Someone at Work Has a Problem* guides employees in intervening with a co-worker who may have an alcohol, other drug or gambling problem by outlining workplace indicators and tips for a successful intervention.
- *What You Need to Know About Fitness for Work* outlines the concept of fitness for work, and describes how substance use and gambling affect fitness for work, what an employee can do to be fit for work, and what one can do when others are not fit for work.

For more information on these and other resources from AADAC, call 310-0000/780-427-7319 (in Alberta) or 1-800-280-9616 or check the website at www.aadac.com

Employer Consultations • If you are concerned about an employee's substance use or gambling and would like to discuss strategies to intervene, contact the AADAC office nearest you.

Client Services • AADAC's network of services offers information sessions, assessment, individual and group counselling, and intensive treatment to any Albertan concerned about a substance use or gambling problem. Contact the nearest AADAC office for information.

Treatment Programs for Employees • The AADAC Business and Industry Clinic offers residential treatment programs specifically for the workplace. Located at the Northern Addictions Centre in Grande Prairie, the clinic offers a complete range of services to meet the needs of employees with substance abuse or gambling problems, as well as the needs of the referring party. Services include detoxification, a 30-day alcohol and drug program, a 50-day cocaine program, a family program and extensive follow-up programs. For more information, call 780-538-6316 or 1-800-419-1149.

Training for the Workplace • AADAC offers training to assist businesses in addressing substance abuse and gambling in the workplace. Training topics include understanding addiction, alcohol and drug policy development, and supervisory training on dealing with the troubled employee. Workshops can be custom designed and delivered at the worksite. For more information, contact your local AADAC area office.

ALBERTA ALCOHOL AND
DRUG ABUSE COMMISSION

For more information, contact your local AADAC office,
call 1-866-33AADAC or visit our website at www.aadac.com

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